



the image of the primitive in black letters

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Since colonial times American authors, both Black and White, for reasons peculiarly their own, have concerned themselves with the image of the Negro as a primitive. Over the centuries the cult of the primitive has had a very mixed American reception, particularly as regards its applicability to the races. Hence the portrayal of Negroes reflects not only changing cultural attitudes, but changing racial attitudes. It will be the purpose of this paper to examine some of these changes especially in the light of the ways Black authors have attempted to cope with them. But before doing so it will be first necessary to arrive at some kind of definition of the term "primitive."

In accordance with popular American literary usage, "primitive" usually connotes a dark skinned person—an Indian, a Negro, a southern European type, or sometimes, as Leslie Fiedler suggests, a Jew—who cannot or will not submit himself to the rule of reason, to the restraints of western civilization. He lives close to his emotions, impulses or nature and sees these as ends in themselves. In the nineteenth century no self-respecting White American would acknowledge such an identity since it implied a hindrance to "progress," however ambivalently progress may have been regarded. The first White primitives could therefore only sneak through the back door in disguise as it were—as folk figures out of an innocent past (like Daniel Boone), or as antebellum figures out of a past innocence (like Huck Finn), or as refugees from and carriers of civilization (like Natty Bumpo) or as partakers of Nature in order to discover or rediscover transcendental meaning (like Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman). It was not until the twentieth century that the White primitive could overtly celebrate himself as himself.

The emergence of twentieth-century White primitives (of which Ernest Hemingway's heroes, Norman Mailer's White Negroes and present day hippies are perhaps the most egregious examples) was undoubtedly catalyzed by a reaction to the end of the frontier and the triumph of

urban civilization. For primitivism is after all the decadence of the supercivilized since real primitives (if they exist at all) are by definition too unselfconscious to be aware of themselves as “alienated” and would not of course be “primitive” in the romantic sense of being psychologically unfettered—quite the opposite. Only persons living in a society that promises an individualism it cannot satisfy and who consequently feel at some remove from a sense of themselves or a sense of over-all purpose can afford the luxury of that fantasy. Hence the cult of the primitive attained unexpected popularity in the twentieth century since the new American city dweller, enmeshed in the complexities of urban life, still subscribed to ideals of individual freedom and social mobility that seemed more realizable in an earlier pastoral America.

In this respect it is interesting to note the role of the first White primitive in vaudeville. (Wild West shows, minstrel shows, Black musical comedies and occasionally vaudeville had been portraying non-Whites—Negroes and Indians—in accustomed primitive status for some years.) Vaudeville, according to one of its best interpreters was a truly city entertainment, the performance of which unconsciously and ritualistically celebrated the pace, the glamor and the myths of success of the city as opposed to the more stable, conservative values of pre-urban America.¹ Joe Knowles, a middle-aged, part time illustrator, acquired nation-wide notoriety as an author and vaudeville attraction after a much publicized stunt in 1913 in which he had gone naked into the Maine woods and emerged forty-one days later in blooming health having lived, he said, on berries, trout, venison and partridge.² What is striking here is not Knowles’ feat (which was probably faked) but that within the very institution intended to exalt the sophistication of the city there appeared now an immensely popular figure who represented (however vulgarly) quite the opposite appeal. Joe Knowles and later Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan (1914), both of whom reverted to a simple life, are probably the principal “pop” precursors (unless, of course, one wants to include Jack London and Teddy Roosevelt) of White primitives, Hemingway, et al. Which may in part explain what Langston Hughes later called the “vogue” of the Negro in the 1920’s.³ Negroes, after all, were primitives to begin with.

The stereotype of the Negro as primitive is by and large a product of the romantic imagination although certain aspects of the stereotype may be traced as far back as Elizabethan times. Prior to the nineteenth century the justification for Negro slavery was seldom maintained on purely racial grounds although the Negro was generally thought to be inferior. Nonetheless, the liberal and democratic tendencies of the eighteenth century appeared to presage the end of the slave trade and the eventual freedom of chattel. Unfortunately this process was arrested with the invention of the cotton gin (1792) which created additional demands for slave labor in newly settled areas west of the Appalachians.

Not surprisingly, the advent of western expansion coincided with the appearance of a new romantic literature extolling the primitive in Nature and Man. Ironically, the celebration of the primitive was ultimately put into the service of a plantation economy and the continued oppression of the Negro was held justified.

The romantic obsession with the primitive was originally directed toward the Indian, but by extension all darker races came to be included. The image of the primitive as possessing an unsullied innocence was one to gladden any heart engaged in the world's work. Moreover the fantasy of the dark primitive gave identity-hungry White Americans a status they might not otherwise have achieved in a still unformed society. Insofar as the primitive presented no immediate threat to the White man's physical survival or emotional needs, he became an object of veneration, love and delight, as in Cooper's romantic portrayal of dying Mohicans or John Pendleton Kennedy's idyll of happy, contented slaves.⁴ When, however, there existed a real or imagined competitiveness between the races, Negroes and Indians were attributed the very inverse of Rousseauistic traits, and came to be regarded as malevolent, destructive, treacherous and depraved. The extent to which American authors projected their own repressed Dionysian impulses onto darker peoples cannot, of course, be measured. James Baldwin notes the startling transformation of the portraiture of the American Negro after the Civil War in the following terms: "Uncle Tom, the trustworthy and sexless needed only to drop the title 'Uncle' to become violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by."⁵ Baldwin's indictment of post Civil War American authors is not however altogether accurate. So long as the Negro remained a pariah even after emancipation, he represented no real danger and certain lovable, primitive traits continued to be patronizingly described. Thus the superstitious, banjo-plunking, watermelon-stealing, mischievous innocent has remained a standard figure in American letters up through the 1930's—notably in the works of Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, Stephen Crane, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Van Vechten, Booth Tarkington, Du Bose Heyward, Octavus Roy Cohen and a host of others.

What Vachel Lindsay once described as the Negro's "basic savagery" has, nonetheless, always existed somewhere latent in even the most idyllic portrayals of American Negroes by White authors.⁶ In Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, for example, the young mulatto who has been able to pass himself off as a White behaves like a scoundrel, and his Black slave mother, a formidable sympathetic creature, despairs that it is his Negro blood that is to blame for all his villainy. Perhaps the ambivalent attitude of White American authors is best unconsciously symbolized in Stephen Crane's story, "The Monster." In this tale a Black servant risks his life to save a White boy from fire, but in so doing, is burned so hideously that everyone, White and Negro, shuns him in revulsion and

horror. Here possibly lies the basic dilemma of the White author in his treatment of the Black American. On the one hand, his conscience, good sense and American creed compel him to recognize the Negro's humanity; on the other hand, so much of the aura of the "monster" has been created about him that he is unable to do so. Sometimes the image of the good-innocent, bad-violent primitive is combined and focused on a single figure, as in Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Battler." Here the peripatetic Nick Adams stumbles across an ex-prize fighter whose devoted Negro companion must from time to time knock him unconscious in order to save him from harming himself and others. A similar confusion of motifs may be seen in Faulkner's *Light in August*, where the presumed mulatto, Joe Christmas, who has committed rape and murder, becomes a Christ figure.

Not unaccountably, Negro authors too have appropriated the double image of the primitive in describing members of their race. Despite the fact that the American Negro community obviously possesses cultural features peculiarly its own, it has also taken cultural cues from the dominant White civilization. Hence, like White American authors, Negro writers not only describe characters whose identity is insecure, but bear the additional onus of portraying members of their race about whom peculiarly contradictory conceptions exist. These conceptions do not, of course, conform to the Negro's psychology as they could not conform to that of any living human beings.⁷ Yet had the Negro author been able to cope with these issues, he would still have had to face the problem of his reading public, White or Negro. Until recently, to succeed financially, he would have had to win over White readers. Dare he violate their sensibilities, their prejudices, their preconceptions of what he and his people were like?—so far as they are alike? Were he to attempt to reach only Black readers (and there have been too few of them), would they be sophisticated enough to understand what he was trying to say? But what was he trying to say? Being an American, he tended to submit, sometimes unconsciously, to the stereotype of the primitive that a White society had imposed upon him. To this day Negro writing abounds with both minstrel figures and LeRoi Jones type savage avengers. It is a short span of time from the darkies and pickaninnies of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris to the "Mandys" of Paul Laurence Dunbar and the *Conjure Woman Tales* of Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Nor is the time span much greater from the miscegenating monster of Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* to the criminal murderer of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Not only has the Negro writer frequently succumbed to these images, he has often vigorously averred that his portrayals of Black life are more authentic than those offered by White authors. But however true this may be, the fact that Black writers portray their characters as primitive does not in itself insure that the richness and complexity of Negro life has been adequately treated.

The concept of the Black as uncivilizable is so woven into the very texture of American society that even when Black authors are not writing about Black life, they frequently make some allusion to Negro primitivism—if only to deny its applicability to themselves. Thus Phillis Wheatley celebrating her passage from Africa in eighteenth-century Boston writes, “Twas a mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land.”⁸ And nineteenth-century Black antebellum abolitionist authors, propagandists and agitators direct their arguments as often as not against the view of Negroes as simple children incapable of comprehending the ways of the White world, a view promulgated by countless contemporary popular novels. For here really lay the ultimate basis not only for slavery but for the very real oppression, social, political and otherwise, free Negroes suffered in the North. With the exception of Melville, whose *Benito Cereno* showed both sides of the primitive coin (Blacks as murderous avengers and as fawning, devoted darkies), it rarely occurred to American authors that the conditions of life under which Negroes lived seemed almost malevolently designed to produce the kind of Sambo personalities (at least in the presence of Whites) they loved to portray.⁹ But if Black abolitionist authors understood the social basis for the stereotyped version of Negro psychology, the first Black balletists seen not to have understood, and as a consequence depicted Black life in the mirror image of White authors.

Beginning with William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) and extending to include some of the women novelists of the 1920’s—Gertrude Sanborn, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset—Negro authors frequently produced heroes and heroines of elevated manners and morals who could and often would boast of the White blood in their veins, as if by implication the possession of unadulterated African blood were assurance of primitive traits. The post Civil War narrative poet Alberry Whitman (1851-1902), for example, who once called for an end to all Uncle Toms and Topsyies nonetheless portrayed his lower class Blacks in this fashion, whereas his noble central characters possessed large infusions of White blood. Likewise a Negro doctor in Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) is described as owning “blood of a proud aristocratic ancestry . . . and generations of blood admixture had effaced all trace of his Negro lineage.”¹⁰

The first real flowering of Negro letters occurred in the years 1890-1915 which Robert Bone, in *The Negro Novel in America* (1964), aptly describes as a period dominated by authors of middle class values. But, significantly, “middle class” here really means anti-primitivistic. Like their predecessors, Negro authors of this period were so possessed of fears of racial inferiority that they practically wrote themselves out explaining the infinite superiority of persons of mixed blood and of impeccable bourgeois manners. (“A like number of no other race in this country, their equals financially, could approach these Afro-Americans in gallantry and orderly demeanour.”)¹¹ Worse yet, even allowing for occasional realistic flourishes, they often portrayed lower class Blacks as either comic,

childlike contented slaves and peasants (like much of Paul Laurence Dunbar and a subsequent school of dialect poets) or as a race apart which no civilized person would want to associate with. Rarely (as in only a few of Dunbar's poems) did the innocence of the Black peasant emerge as a kind of self-possessed integrity. More typical was the class snobbery of James Weldon Johnson, the best of the early novelists who writes ". . . refined coloured people get no more pleasure out of riding with offensive Negroes than anybody else would get."¹² And W. E. B. DuBois, the most militant of Negro spokesmen of the first part of the century, has as his novel's heroine a peasant girl of slothful, degraded standards who must acquire an almost classical Northern education before she can become a race leader.¹³

Pathetically, the caricatured Negro was perpetuated as well in the new Negro theater that had begun to flourish around the turn of the century. Issuing in part from Black minstrel shows, this theater was a kind of musical comedy that played unfortunately to White city audiences until around 1910. From this distance it is sometimes difficult to assess how much of the humor belonged to a broad vaudeville tradition, how much was a catering to White racial tastes and how much lay inherent in a native Black culture. But a glance at some of the titles of these shows may suggest the ways Negro performers exploited their particular brand of primitivism: *A Trip to Coontown*, *Clorindy—The Origin of the Cakewalk*, *Jes Lak White Folks*, *The Policy Players*, *The Sons of Ham*, *In Dahomey*, *Bandana Land*, *Rufus Rastus*. Possibly some of the material contained a kind of folk satire that only the very knowledgeable would discern. Commenting on the comic duo Williams and Walker (the one being "the slow-witted, good-natured, shuffling darky," the other, "the sleek, smiling, prancing dandy"),¹⁴ James Weldon Johnson wrote that as a team "they achieved something beyond mere fun; they often achieved the truest comedy through the ability they had to keep the tears close up under the loudest laughter."¹⁵ But even Johnson had to admit that because Negro performers of this period faced predominantly White audiences they were subject not only to a number of restraints, but were required to do "a good many things that were distasteful" since it was thought these would please the customers.¹⁶ It was thus a thin line that divided folk satire from the kind of self-ridicule (or self-hatred) that descends to primitive caricature—a line crossed and recrossed many times not only by Negro performers but by Negro authors as well.

Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) suggests a number of reasons for the weaknesses of the Negro theatre in the Harlem Renaissance. Among these was the failure to find or seek Black playwrights to write plays for Black performers and Black audiences; another was the failure of a solid Black bourgeoisie to provide appropriate institutional and intellectual support for the drama; and a third was the seduction of Black artists and intellectuals by "integrationists" on the

one hand and White radicals on the other. Cruse adds perceptively that American Marxists' analysis of social conditions in the 1920's did not conform to the broader realities of American life and was especially irrelevant for the Negro community. But these observations are applicable not simply to the Black theater, but to Negro letters generally—which of course puzzles one as to why the Harlem Renaissance has become so sacrosanct to Black critics and intellectuals (Cruse, among them) today. Allowing for its promise (according to Cruse) of molding a Black consciousness, creating or defining a cultural philosophy that would give identity to the Black nation and hence to the larger America—the fact is that the Renaissance failed these objectives for the reasons Cruse cited. And the achievement of a subsequent generation of Black writers seems incomparably greater not only aesthetically but in terms of discovering or rediscovering a Black identity.

But the point to be stressed here is the psychological one. The centuries old, ingrained primitive stereotype so stuck, that strive as Negro writers might, they could only re-express it—not, to be sure, as the minstrel or the one dimensional comic darky—but as one variation or another of the noble savage. In other words, the Black man of the 1920's was portrayed not unlike the near extinct Indian of the nineteenth century. It was a portrayal that delighted both Black and White writers, and that both employed to excess. For the city-weary White middle class, surfeited with the moral ardor of the Progressive era of which World War I must have seemed the logical bloody culmination, the fantasy of the insouciant, rhythmic, libidinal Black possessed grand appeal. As regards White intellectuals, nurtured now on Freud, Jung and Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (by way of Picasso's cubism, fauvists and African sculpture), they too were entranced by the "idea" of earthy, lower class Blacks—taxi dancers, pimps, prostitutes, jazz musicians, peasants, domestics and so on—whose simple natural virtues remained untouched despite the cares, tensions and materialism of the post-war period. Curiously, with the exception of DuBois and a few others, Black intellectuals failed to object to the new picture. Indeed they thought they had once and for all disposed of the old stereotype, but in effect they had only substituted one primitive for another.

None of the above is intended to imply the Renaissance was simply a reflex action to White cultural trends. Obviously Negro writers were responding, however vaguely and stumbling, to deeply felt spiritual needs. Adversity had made them politically and culturally aware, and they were, for a host of historical reasons, attempting for the first time to come to terms with themselves as a people. In certain respects they succeeded. By focusing attention on the Black masses, sans ridicule, condescension or apology, they paved the way for a more realistic assessment of Negro life. And by averring pride in their ancestry and African roots, they acknowledged for the first time that self-recognition as Black men had for them

at least as high a priority as some of the more abstract ideals they professed to believe in. Even those authors who portrayed their characters as crudely primitive did so from a sense of bitter pride that they were at least not so corrupt or spiritually ravaged as their White oppressors. But Renaissance writers did, from time to time, transcend primitive stereotypes to produce characters who were at once believable and Black—perhaps the best examples being some of the roles Jean Toomer wrote for his play “Kabnis” in *Cane*. Yet one is struck more by the persistence of the stereotype than its transcendence in say, the fiction of Rudolph Fischer or Claude McKay, or even the lower class Blacks of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. And where poets like Countee Cullen or Claude McKay carefully avoid the stereotype, they run to older models such as Keats or employ traditional verse forms. Which of course only begins to suggest how psychologically dependent most Negro writers were on cultural images outside the Black community.

In *Black Manhattan* James Weldon Johnson inadvertently reveals that this dependence was not necessarily related to White financial support or patrimony. From 1910-1917, he writes, when Black theater companies were producing their *own* plays in Harlem for exclusively Black audiences, they invariably performed “crude Negro burlesque” or “white” plays—“downtown [Broadway] successes.” The burlesque belonged to that “older tradition” of Negro theater that used to play to largely White audiences, while the Broadway dramas could scarcely be regarded as depicting the realities of Negro life.¹⁷ In his autobiography, Claude McKay recalled how in the twenties his White friend and colleague on the radical *Liberator*, Max Eastman, discouraged him from writing “Negro stories straight and unpolished,”¹⁸ which explains in part Langston Hughes’s statement in *his* autobiography that most Negroes in Harlem in the twenties did not even know a Renaissance existed.¹⁹ They did not, one suspects, because the new primitive often promulgated by Black writers as the New Negro reflected Negro life as they imagined White authors would see it. For a newly arrived peasant people attempting to survive a complicated urban society, the image of the carefree, romantic, hedonistic Negro did not make much sense. There were, to be sure, authentic flashes and a few successes in the literature of the twenties (as noted above), but these were often rendered cruelly inaccessible to Blacks—just as Duke Ellington’s rich ethnic music was played in a Harlem cabaret that barred Negro patrons.

However else it may be regarded, the Renaissance in portraying Negroes as noble, earthy creatures rendered the last of the accruals of the primitive metaphor. Most subsequent authors, Black and White, have played only variations on this image while some have bypassed primitivism altogether. The Depression decade, as is well known, produced a dearth of Negro writers primarily because of hard times. But the few Black authors who did manage to publish, frequently merged their Negro

characters racelessly with other bottomdog figures of American society.²⁰ A major exception was the author, Richard Wright, whose Black protagonists in his novellas, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), despite their nascent or expressed Communism, were nationalists under the skin, whether Wright liked to think so or not. For the purposes of this paper, however, Wright's importance lies in the fact that in his next published work—the novel, *Native Son* (1940)—he became the first Black writer to use the pejorative image of the primitive. Heretofore the Negro as beast or savage savage had been almost the exclusive province of White Southern apologists like Thomas Dixon whose portrayal of Blacks in the second of his anti-Negro novels, *The Clansman* (1905), was unfortunately popularized ten years later in D. W. Griffiths' film, "The Birth of a Nation." Bigger Thomas, the central figure in Wright's novel, was a sullen anti-social killer, one of whose victims was a sympathetic White girl, thereby arousing a variety of deep-seated, racial-sexual anxieties in both his readers and most of the White characters in the book. Wright's point of course was that the ghetto, and the caste system generally, produced the kind of savages Thomas Dixon liked to write about. But by unleashing Bigger's hatred in print, Wright also seemed to be unleashing several kinds of subject matter hitherto regarded as inappropriate for Negro authors to write about. After Wright, interracial love, homosexuality, the Negro criminal, Black racism and a host of other themes were no longer taboo, and the Negro author has felt free as well to use or dispose of the primitive image in any way he pleased. Indeed the Invisible Man of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel is invisible precisely because, in the course of his adventures, he has attempted to embody a variety of primitive roles (all of which are disguises) that White men expect of him. With the upsurge of nationalism in the late 1950's and the present decade, some Negro authors—most notably LeRoi Jones—have turned once again to Wright's savage savage Bigger as a working model. Their reasons are presumably political, certainly not aesthetic: to arouse Blacks to a militant pitch, and, possibly, to terrify Whites. But unless the political author is especially adroit with his images, he may find he is contradicting himself. Hence, Eldridge Cleaver (*Soul on Ice*, 1967), who as an ex-convict has himself personified the savage savage, may celebrate the Negro's immense sexuality in one essay and then bewail the oppressed Negro as a "eunuch" in another.

Perhaps the most bitterly acute observations on Negro primitivism are made by the protagonist, Jesse, in Chester Himes's little-noticed novel, *The Primitive*. The primitive, he remarks, is really the invention of the so-called civilized who want to dehumanize others less fortunate than they. In America's topsy-turvy system of values the truly civilized are called primitive and the uncivilized consider themselves human. Having just committed an act of violence, Jesse muses, he is now entitled to join the "human race."

No more worrying about what's right and what's wrong. Just what's expedient. You're human now. Went in the back door of the Alchemy Company of America a primitive, filled with things called principles, integrity, honor, conscience, faith, love, hope, charity and such, and came out the front door a human being, completely purged. End of a primitive; beginning of a human. Good title for a book but won't sell in America with the word *human* in it. . . . But they'll know damn well you're human. Be in all the newspapers: *Black man kills white woman*. Not only natural, plausible, logical, inevitable, psychiatrically compulsive and sociologically accurate and politically correct as well. Black man has got to have some means of joining the human race. Old Shakespeare knew. Suppose he'd had Othello kiss the bitch and make up. Would have dehumanized him.²¹

It would probably be too much to expect the early demise of Negro primitivism in American letters, but should this happen, it will signal not simply the passing of a literary fantasy, but, more significantly, the passing of an American nightmare.

footnotes

1. See Albert F. McLean, Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Louisville, 1965), 1-16, 38-65.
2. For more about Knowles see Roderick Nash, "The American Cult of the Primitive," *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Fall 1966), 520-538.
3. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York, 1963), 334.
4. An excellent study of the origins of American racism may be found in "Part One. GENESIS 1550-1700" in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968).
Generally speaking the "bad" Indians in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* are little better than demons: fierce, cruel, savagely destructive and conscienceless. The "good" Indians recognize that white men are intended as new masters of the land. In *The Pioneers* (1823), Chingachgook tells Elizabeth Temple, "Daughter, the Great Spirit gave your fathers to know how to make guns and powder, that they might sweep the Indians from the land. There will soon be no redskin in the country." John Pendleton Kennedy's complaisant slaves in *Swallow Barn* (1832) are echoed in works by other antebellum, pro-slavery authors, such as William Gilmore Simms, W. A. Carruthers, Beverley and George Tucker, John Esten Cooke and Caroline Lee Hentz.
5. James Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son* (Boston, 1962), 28.
6. The other traits Lindsay attributes to Negroes in "The Congo" (1914) support the minstrel stereotype: "Their Irrepressible High Spirits," "The Hope of Their Religion."
7. A good example of the former is the 1961-62 Broadway success, *Purlie Victorious* (subsequently made into a movie, "Gone Are The Days") by Ossie Davies. Although intended as a burlesque of Southern racial mores, Black actors perform their roles in broad folksy caricature. In Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence* and Rod MacIver's *God Is A Guess What*, both of which have been produced in repertory in recent years at New York's Negro Ensemble Company, the actors don masks or White paint and play Whites as caricatures. Although the masks make their obvious political and social points, one suspects the imaginative capacities of the authors of these plays remain to a certain extent caught up in the minstrel image regardless of their satirical intentions.
8. "On Being Brought From Africa To America," *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason, Jr. (Chapel Hill, 1966), 7. In another poem, "To The University of Cambridge In New-England," 5, she describes Africa as a "land of errors and Egyptian gloom" from whose "dark abodes" she mercifully escaped.
9. In Stanley M. Elkins' controversial *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), the author argues that the Sambo personality may not have been simply a caricature, but a reality, a psychic means of survival for slaves made utterly dependent on their masters in the closed society of the plantation. A forceful challenge of this thesis may be found in Mary Agnes Lewis, "Slavery and Personality: A Further Comment," *American Quarterly*, XIX (Spring 1967), 115-121. But however right or wrong Elkins may be,

the Black writer assumed Sambo's reality long after the Civil War. In his novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, W. E. B. DuBois describes a Southern colonel's servant as "one of those constitutionally timid creatures into whom the servility of his fathers had sunk so deep that it had become second nature. To him a White man was an archangel, while . . . his father's masters stood for God. He served them with dog-like faith. . . ."

10. Quoted in Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee, ed., *The Negro Caravan* (New York, 1941), 139-140.

11. Quoted in Hugh Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill, 1948), 32.

12. James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography Of An Ex-Coloured Man* (1912). The quote is from the subsequent 1927 (Knopf) Garden City edition, 81.

13. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (Chicago, 1911).

14. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1968), 108. Johnson's historical sketch of New York Negroes was initially published in 1930.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 171.

17. Johnson contends that in this brief period of independence Negro performers experienced for the first time an exhilarating sense of freedom. Yet he cites scarcely any instances where this freedom translated itself into productions intrinsically different from the kind that had once been performed for White audiences or were then being performed for White audiences on Broadway by White theater companies. Part of the exhilaration evidently stemmed from the fact that Negro companies, like The Lafayette Players, could now perform *White* plays like *Madame X*, *The Servant in the House*, *On Trial*, *The Love of Choo Chin* and others. Indeed, Johnson writes that "for a time Negro sketches and musical shows were swept off the stage, but they are now back again." (172.) Nonetheless the highest achievement of the Renaissance years may well have derived from the Negro musical theater which gave countless Black performers the opportunity to develop their talents. A glance at any list of actors, musicians, dancers and singers of this period will confirm what Harold Cruse has described as Harlem's important contribution to the American musical theater. But the point is that practically all the originality, ability and creativity came from the performers themselves and not from the written material they enacted. They literally transcended and transformed the hackneyed plays and productions in which they appeared.

18. Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York, 1969), 254. McKay did not of course take Eastman's advice that he write his Negro tales in verse, but the characters he describes in his first two novels (*Home to Harlem*, 1928, and *Banjo*, 1929), free wheeling, happy-go-lucky and libidinal, provide ample illustration of the Renaissance primitive stereotype. In his autobiography McKay insists that they are realistically drawn and regrets that his "damned white education has robbed me of much of the *primitive* [italics mine] vitality, the pure stamina, the simple unswaggering strength of the Jakes of the Negro race [Jake is the hero of *Home to Harlem*]." (229.) One cannot help thinking however that it was McKay's "damned white education" that prevented him from seeing his Negro characters in greater depth.

19. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 228.

20. A not uncharacteristic poem of this period is Robert Hayden's "Speech." See *Negro Caravan*, 407.

Hear me, black brothers,
White brothers, hear me:
I have heard the words
They set like barbed-wire fences
To divide you,
I have heard the words—
Dirty nigger, poor white trash—
And the same voice spoke them;
Brothers, listen well to me,
The same voice spoke them.

21. Chester Himes, *The Primitive* (New York, 1955), 159.